

Jonah Goes to Nineveh

Jonah 3:1-4:4 (ESV)

Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, ²“Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you.” ³So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days’ journey in breadth. ⁴Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s journey. And he called out, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” ⁵And the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them.

The People of Nineveh Repent

⁶The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. ⁷And he issued a proclamation and published through Nineveh, “By the decree of the king and his nobles: Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything. Let them not feed or drink water, ⁸but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and let them call out mightily to God. Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. ⁹Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish.”

¹⁰When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.

Jonah’s Anger and the LORD’S Compassion

⁴But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. ²And he prayed to the LORD and said, “O LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster. ³Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.” ⁴And the LORD said, “Do you do well to be angry?”

Jesus Begins His Ministry

Mark 1:14-20 (ESV)

¹⁴Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, ¹⁵and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”

Jesus Calls the First Disciples

¹⁶Passing alongside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. ¹⁷And Jesus said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men.” ¹⁸And immediately they left their nets and followed him. ¹⁹And going on a little farther, he saw James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, who were in their boat mending the nets. ²⁰And immediately he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants and followed him.

Compassion's Obstacle

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union United Church of Christ, Cambridge, Massachusetts

Date: January 22, 2006

Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Texts: *Jonah 3:1-4:4 Mark 1:14-20*

At 12:35 AM PST on December 13, twelve days before Christmas in 2005 Stanley Tookie Williams was pronounced dead from a lethal injection administered by the state of California. In 1981 Tookie Williams was convicted of the brutal murders of four innocent people in 1979 and sentenced to death. After twenty-six years on death row, the appeals were exhausted, and the sentence was carried out amid the vocal arguments of both his supporters and his opponents.

The Tookie Williams' case is complicated. His opponents claim that Williams was and remained to the end a cold-blooded killer. They point out that he never admitted his guilt and therefore never apologized for his crimes.

Williams' supporters argue that all the evidence against him was circumstantial and that there were a number of irregularities in the trial. Even more important they point out, for the last twelve years in prison Williams had recanted his gang life and had written books and otherwise worked tirelessly to convince young people to avoid a life on the street. He was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize several times, for example, by faculty from schools such as Brown University as well as previous Nobel laureates. His supporters say that Williams' claim of innocence was sincere, and therefore he could not in good conscience apologize for the murders he did not commit, even if it would helped his cause. And, as we will see in a few minutes, it could not have helped his cause in the least.

In the end, the facts are complex. It is impossible to know who the real Tookie Williams was. And maybe the best we can do is trust that the legal system took as much care as was possible in assessing the case. Reluctantly perhaps, for some, we have to believe that Tookie Williams was guilty.

However, the last days of Tookie Williams' life and the flurry of events surrounding it raise a different set of questions from his guilt or innocence. After the legal appeals ran out, there was one possibility left. The governor could spare Williams' life in an act of clemency. As all of us recall, that is what Williams' lawyers asked governor Schwarzenegger to do. The clemency petition emphasized the theme of Williams' redemption, rather than his claim of actual innocence. On October 12th, the governor declined, and just after midnight the next morning the execution was carried out.

One question is, was there ever a chance that Schwarzenegger would grant the clemency petition? Austin Sarat, professor of law and politics at Amherst College and author of *Mercy on Trial*, a book about clemency, doubts that there was. He doubted that Schwarzenegger would grant clemency, not because of what he thought of Schwarzenegger, not because of what he thought of Tookie Williams' redemption, but because the basis for granting clemency is never rehabilitation. Sarat says that actual innocence is "about the only ground on which governors grant clemency in the modern period." He says, "I know of no case in which a death row inmate

has been spared (solely) on the basis of post-conviction rehabilitation.” Let me say that again, Professor Sarat says, “I know of no case in which a death row inmate has been spared (solely) on the basis of post-conviction rehabilitation.”

The Lord told Jonah to go to Nineveh and tell them to repent of their evil ways. You know the story. Jonah bought passage on the first ship out of town. But, as we have heard in recent times, Jonah could run, but he could not hide. The Lord found him out and sent the sea into a tumult. To his credit, when the others found out it was Jonah who was at fault for their swamping ship, he advised them to throw him overboard. They did. The fish, not a whale, which is a mammal—the Bible says a great fish swallowed Jonah and three days later spit him onto land. While in the belly of the fish Jonah made the Lord all kinds of vows. You know the kind. “Just get me out of this mess, O Lord, and I’ll do anything you want.” Have you ever made such promises? I have. Jonah did, too, and when he hit land, they came due. The Lord gave Jonah the same command as before: “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you.”

This time Jonah obeys the Lord. Nineveh was a large city. It took three days to walk across it. Jonah began. Every few feet he would cry out, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown! Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” I imagine him as a Baptist preacher. O Nineveh, let me tell you that you are living in sin. You are hanging by a thread. The Lord has sent me to tell you that the end of your days are upon you. Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!”

Something happened that has to every preacher’s dream. The people listened. They began to repent. When the king caught wind of what was going on, he made a decree: “By the decree of the king and his nobles ... Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish.”

The text tells us that God listened to them. It says, “When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.”

Jonah, who knew the modern requirement for clemency, objected. Jonah knew that the people had done evil things. Jonah felt that, therefore, there should be no mercy. When God spared the Ninevites, Jonah cried out, “O LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster. Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.”

Jonah believes that there should no clemency for the guilty, no matter how much they repent, no matter how much they change their ways. Jonah is, in this sense, a thoroughly modern man. He would make the modern decision that there is no clemency from the death penalty unless the people are innocent. By Jonah’s lights, the Ninevites should not have been spared.

The short book of Jonah ends with God incredulous, asking Jonah, “And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons ... and also much cattle?”

Like so many of the Biblical stories, the book of Jonah is a beautifully crafted tale, with twists and turns and multiple meanings. We have a wonderful story of the love and mercy of God. Is that not something we can be glad for?

In the end, though, the story is more about Jonah than about the Ninevites. It’s about

what Jonah does and doesn't do. Jonah takes the hardline with the Ninevites. "If you have done wrong, then you must pay for your crime. If you don't want to do the time, then don't do the crime." And yet Jonah himself applies a different standard to himself. When he finds himself in the belly of the fish he thanks the Lord for saving and promises to obey God in the future. I don't believe that any of us here today have been found guilty of murdering innocent people as Tookie Williams was, or guilty of the crimes of the Ninevites, although those are unspecified, but even so, who, who among us has not had reason to be grateful in our lives that we have been forgiven? Who among us has not known mercy? Who among us has been treated better than we deserve by those whom we have injured? Who among us can throw the first stone? The mercy that God showed Jonah was but days old, and yet Jonah seemed to have forgotten it entirely.

Now we arrive at the focus of the whole story. It is not mostly about Nineveh's repentance. It is not exactly about the irony that Jonah has been shown mercy but cannot find it in himself to grant it. The focus is that God wanted Jonah to repent of his desire to take revenge. God brings Jonah to Nineveh to show him a different way, a different model. God demonstrates what it means to forgive and to do mercy. And Jonah responds, "Is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster."

God gives Jonah an object lesson in love and forgiveness. And Jonah is bold to say, "That's why I didn't want to come in the first place. I didn't want to see forgiveness. Don't slow me down with Godly instruction. I know what I think is right, and I don't want to see anything that would contradict me." Jonah goes so far as to say, "I would rather be dead than change my mind. Don't confuse me with the word of God. Don't slow me down with a different version of morality. I'd rather be dead than change."

In the end, the story of Jonah is about God wanting desperately to heal Jonah's hardened heart. It is a story of God wanting to save Jonah's soul, to breathe life into his lifeless view of the world, to show him the life-giving way of love and forgiveness.

In the same sense the questions that arise from Tookie Williams are about more than Tookie's life, or about the lives he was convicted of ending. It is about both of those to be sure. God wanted the evil in Nineveh to stop, just as we want innocent killing stopped. It's about the possibility there was to save Tookie, whether guilty or innocent, just as it was about saving 120,000 people and some cattle in Nineveh. But in the end, one of the most important things it may be about is us and our notions of justice and punishment and vengeance, and what they create in us, what they create us to be.

In the days leading up to Tookie Williams' execution, one of the most applauded responses was a show on KFI Radio in Los Angeles. Popular talk show hosts John and Ken held a show entitled, "John and Ken's Tookie Must Die Hour," in which they and most of their callers whopped it up with high spirited rhetoric about how Tookie was getting just what he deserved. His changed behavior was ridiculed and waved away as meaningless.

John and Ken, as do many in talk radio, appealed to their audience's most raw and primitive instincts. Of course crimes like those that Tookie Williams was convicted of, crimes like September 11 and suicide bombings of innocent people outrage us. They set to boiling our revulsion and our inborn desire to strike back. I imagine all of us experience these feelings in the face of horrible acts. What the Lord wanted to show Jonah, though, was that it is a better

thing to let these base instincts be overcome by love and mercy and forgiveness.

The widow of one of the people Tookie Wilson was convicted of killing released a statement that said, "I, Linda Owens want to build upon Mr. Williams' peace initiative. I invite Mr. Williams to join me in sending a message to all communities that we should all unite in peace. This position of peace would honor my husband's memory and Mr. Williams work."

But most people and the system disagreed. The professor from Amherst says in our system of justice clemency is never granted for those who are adjudged guilty. What does that say about us? What would a different view, like that held by Linda Owens say about us, instead? And to which view is God calling us? The answer to that one we hear from God directly in God's question to Jonah, "Do you do well to be angry?" There is perhaps no better question for us. For there may be no greater obstacle to our possibility of compassion, of love and forgiveness and mercy. Amen.